President Showing No Sign of Strain

By Jack Anderson

President Nixon has come through the Watergate ordeal, so far, with no outward sign of strain. This is the remarkable report of aides and visitors whom we have surveyed.

Over the past year, the President's great re-election victory has exploded. One by one, close associates have pleaded guilty to crimes and have accused other trusted aides of crimes. Each day, month after month, has brought news of yet another moral calamity.

The President has been revealed as a tax fudger who would use dubious loopholes to reduce his income tax below that of an ordinary worker, a finagler who would bilk the taxpayers for improvements to his personal property. When crimes and improprieties have been traced right to his door, he has defended himself by claiming the President of the United States didn't know what was going on inside the White House.

The dreary revelations, piled one upon another, might have broken a man of less grim determination. The terrible weight could still affect his policy decisions and cause repercussions around the world.

Therefore, we have interviewed several people who have been in contact with the President—visitors, aides and a few intimates—to find out how he is weathering Watergate. Most asked us not to identify them; a few had no objections to being quoted.

Those closest to the President agree he has gone through agony over Watergate. On occasion, they have heard him erupt with rage and profanity. But most of the time, he has bottled up his feelings and gone off to agonize alone.

His favorite retreat during the lonely struggle with his seventh and greatest crisis has been Camp David in the Maryland mountains. Sometimes his close friend, C. G. (Bebe) Rebozo, would join him for a long weekend.

Sources who visited the retreat during these periods say Rebozo would mix a small pitcher of martinis, and the two men would sit in deep silence seemingly on the same wave length.

The President emerged from his introspection several weeks ago full of confidence. He told aides that the worst was over, that the case against him had been presented in the worst possible light and that hereafter his side of the story would receive national attention.

He scheduled a series of speeches and question-and-answer sessions to lay his case before the nation. He sought invitations from Republican candidates to prove he wasn't a political liability. He also sought to show that, despite Watergate, he is still governing the nation. As a climax, he hopes to hold a triumphant summit conference with Kremlin leader Leonid Brezhnev in Moscow.

Those who have been in touch with Mr. Nixon in recent weeks say he is in excellent spirits, showing no signs of fatigue. His voice is strong and decisive, and he speaks with calm assurance. His eyes are clear and penetrating. He looks his visitors straight in the eye, his own gaze never wandering. His handshake is firm. There is color in his cheeks.

Several people told us he looks better now than ever. Party worker Mrs. Martin Erck, who met with the President for the first time in 12 years, commented wonderingly: "He has held up a great deal better than I have."

He is in good humor, often wisecracking and laughing with those around him. A presidential portrait painter, Graham Yates, showed his portraits to Mr. Nixon the other day. The President shuffled through the paintings and came upon his own likeness. Dead pan, he demanded: "How did this get in there?"

But for all the outward optimism, Richard Nixon sometimes still slips back into his private depression. One subordinate told us he recently was awakened early in the morning by a telephone call from the President. Although Mr. Nixon was coherent, it was obvious he had been drinking.

Government Loot—The Fish and Wildlife Service, as we reported last December, is cracking down on shady dealers who profit from killing endangered animals. Although the campaign has been highly successful, it has created an enormous headache for the federal agents.

They don't know what to do with all the booty, more than $2 million worth, that they have seized from traffickers in illegal animal products. Government warehouses are stuffed with such items as vicuna coats, leopard skin coats, tortoise shell products, whalebone sculptures and polar bear hides.

There is the head of a walrus, the foot of a tapir and a stuffed, three-toed Brazilian sloth. In one seizure alone, agents confiscated 1,200 pairs of shoes made from the hide of the rare Nile crocodile. Another seized shipment netted 20,400 dozen feathers from protected birds. Still another investigation brought in 12,226 cans of barbecued and smoked sperm whale meat intended for gourmet shops.

Normally, seized animal products are donated to museums, zoos and schools. But worthy institutions can use only so many fancy feathers and stuffed heads. And where would they display a vicuna coat or an expensive jewel hewn from the shell of a Hawksbill sea turtle?

Fish and Wildlife officials feel they can't sell the confiscated items or give them away, as this might foster the same dirty business they are trying to wipe out. Some of the expensive items, therefore, may have to be destroyed.

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